

Crown Farm developers give \$48K to council

■ Activists say money taints annexation request and say five lawmakers should not vote

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Aris Mardrossian, the developer of Crown Farm, and associates have given \$48,000 to County Council members in the past four years, citizen watchdog groups say, tainting his request to allow the city of Gaithersburg to annex the property.

The five council members receiving the largest donations should not vote on the annexation, according to the groups.

Allowing the annexation would permit denser development on the 183-acre tract than under county zoning rules.

The five council members are George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring, Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg and Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

Neighbors for a Better Montgomery (NeighborsPAC) says it compiled data from the Maryland State Board of Elections showing the contributions from Mardrossian, his family members, businesses and partners in the proposed development.

"I've been doing this four years and I've never seen anything like this level of giving," said Drew Powell, NeighborsPAC's executive director.

With the Montgomery County Civic Federation and Common Cause Maryland, NeighborsPAC is calling for council members who received more than \$4,000 — the maximum that an individual or organization may contribute to a campaign account during an election cycle — not to vote on the annexation request.

"It's on our agenda next week," Leventhal said. "I don't expect the majority of the council to decide to recuse themselves."

Leventhal, whom the NeighborsPAC report lists as having received \$14,500 from Crown Farm developers and their families or businesses, said he supports public financing for political campaigns to avoid the appearance of conflicts of interest.

"I don't see how I'd recuse myself on Crown Farm," Leventhal said. "I'd have to recuse myself on every single issue as a matter of principle."

Floreen reportedly received \$8,500 from Crown Farm interests.

"I think the NeighborsPAC is going to do all they can to discredit

people who make responsible decisions," she said. "They want to twist reality and perception to their world view, and it's most unfortunate. If there's an issue here I'd like to hear it."

NeighborsPAC contends that Aris Mardrossian, Lebling Development LLC, Farm Development Co-op and plumbing contractor Benjamin R. Lewis each exceeded the \$10,000 per cycle limit with their contributions to county and state candidates and political action committees.

Mardrossian denied doing anything wrong and said his accountant has assured him that everything he has done is "correct." He said NeighborsPAC was misinterpreting the records.

"They are trying to silence our political right to support our political candidates," he said.

His family's decades of political activism predate its Crown Farm venture.

He said the family has also contributed to candidates from New Jersey, Michigan and the Eastern Shore where they have no business interests.

Mardrossian said some donations that NeighborsPAC attributes to him personally were from a company that bears his name.

He also said he and his wife share the same checking account and have not exceeded the \$10,000 individual contribution limit.

Contributions from his son, daughter and father also do not exceed limits, and many of the businesses are owned together by 300 Mardrossian family members, he said.

NeighborsPAC lists Lebling Development as exceeding the contribution limit by \$4,000.

"I don't think that's accurate," owner Steven L. Lebling said. "I think this is an effort to intimidate developers and I won't be intimidated. I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing for two decades and that's contributing to candidates and causes that I believe in."

Annexation to Gaithersburg would allow a zoning change that would let Crown Farm developers build 2,250 homes and 320,000 square feet of commercial space in an area where 2,240 homes (which includes affordable units) and 50,000 square feet of space are projected in the county plans.

While the change in the number of homes would be minor, housing activists are concerned that few if any of those would be moderately priced. County law stipulates that 12.5 percent to 15 percent of units in large developments be moderately priced, but Gaithersburg's affordable housing policy is "ad hoc at best," said Thomas H. Cowley of Action in Montgomery.

The developers bought the farm off Fields Road for \$147 million in September. It is one of the last major tracts in rapidly growing central Montgomery. Other partners in the deal include KB Home and Centex Homes.

Staff Writers Janet Davis and C. Benjamin Ford contributed to this report.



Mardrossian